

1 Who is God?¹

If we stand back and consider the impression one gets of the character of God from the Bible as a whole, what emerges?

1 Personal God

The Christian Bible is dominated by a story, or by a series of stories that belong to one overarching story extending ultimately from creation via Israel to Christ, and on via the Church to the new Jerusalem. The story has a huge cast of major and minor figures, but its key participant is one who is not always present in the action at the front of the stage, yet who is actually involved from Beginning to End, at least in the background to the drama, one who hovers there not only as the dramatist who dares not leave the play to the competence of the company, but also as the central character and not merely the author of the story. It concerns the achievement of the dramatist's purpose in the world.

The fact that the Bible is dominated by God's story points us to God's fundamental characteristic as a personal being. In the story, God establishes long-term objectives and immediate plans, makes decisions and implements them, enjoys successes and experiences frustration when other participants in the drama resist the dramatist's vision of how it should proceed, has changes of mind and formulates revised plans for reaching ultimate goals. All the way along God acts and lives in relation to other actors who sometimes fulfill roles manifestly written especially for them, but sometimes seem dangerously independent. The biblical God is not so much a moral force or an ethereal spirit as a person involved with people. When the story speaks of God out for a stroll in the cool of the evening or enjoying the whiff of food cooking, no doubt there were Israelites who understood this talk literalistically. The advantage of such "anthropomorphism" is its vivid testimony to the personal nature of the God of Israel, who can be described in our image in the conviction that we were made in God's image, so that God is sufficiently like us for us to take mutual understanding to be an exquisite possibility.

Speech is of the essence of personhood. Like other actors in the play, the biblical God often speaks, usually not directly to the audience, but to other participants in the drama, though in such a way as we can overhear. God's speaking is thus of importance in the biblical story. But it comes into its own in the teaching of Torah and Prophets. "These are the words of Yahweh," say the prophets, using the personal name of Israel's God. They speak in the manner of the human messenger who declares, "These are the words of King so-and-so." They are uttered by the agent but they come from the sovereign. Sometimes, it seems, the prophets believed that they heard with their own ears words God himself made audible. Sometimes they saw themselves as putting into their own words convictions felt within, which they knew came from God. Either way, they believed that God the actor in Israel's story was

¹ A paper written for a meeting of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England; much of its material appears in revised form in the Commission's report *We Believe in God* (London: Church House/Wilton, CN: Morehouse-Barlow, 1987).

also God the communicator of personal feelings, desires, opinions and intentions.

The actual content of Yahweh's speech also reflects a personal nature. Although capable of being likened to an animal such as a lion or an ox, or to an inanimate object such as a rock, most characteristically Yahweh is a king, a shepherd, a warrior, a guardian, a teacher, a judge, a potter, a builder, a farmer, a husband, a father (or a wife, or a mother). Yahweh has the feelings of a person: love, joy, satisfaction, sympathy, longing, frustration, regret, hurt, jealousy, anger. Yahweh is the dynamic, living God. The point is made concretely by the Torah's consistent prohibition on making an image of God as an aid to worship. The lively, energetic, moving, acting, speaking God of Israel could never be captured by an image; an image could not be an aid to worship of this God.

Being personal involves being in relationship with people, not only speaking but being spoken to. Thus in the First Testament story, and in the address of Torah, Prophets, and Wisdom, speaking involves God in conversation. This being spoken to becomes a focus in the Psalms. "Spoken to," indeed, is too mild a term for the uninhibited expression of love, gratitude, honor, trust, and commitment, and also of disappointment, grief, rage, hurt, and doubt, that characterizes the Psalms. No doubt such self-expression would do the psalmist good whether or not God were a person able to hear, but the Psalms' presupposition is that the God of Israel is real enough and personal enough to appreciate the sharing of enthusiasm and wonder. God has not only ears to hear but feelings to be aroused and energy to be activated. We have come full circle. The God of the First Testament is one who thinks and feels, who gives expression to thoughts and feelings in words and deeds, and who invites human beings into the shared speech of conversation and thus into a shared involvement in the world.

Developments in Judaism by Jesus' day have sometimes been reckoned to have rendered God a somewhat distant figure. Perhaps people could know God's presence and respond to God by keeping the Torah; but perhaps the Torah itself distanced God from them. Perhaps refraining from uttering the name Yahweh reminded them of God's reality; but perhaps removing that name from people's lips removed God as a living person. Perhaps the reports by visionaries of what they have seen and heard mediated God's reality to others, but perhaps they underlie God's apparent absence from the experience of ordinary people.

There are no such ambiguities about the relationship with God as a person which Jesus enjoys and which he shares with those who listen to him. It is summed up in the word "father." At his baptism he hears God say, "You are my son, my beloved, I delight in you" (Mark 1:11). His baptism is a visionary experience like those other religious figures might have, yet it opens the door to an ongoing closeness of relationship with the one of whom he can henceforth say, "God is my father, God loves me, God chooses to fulfill a purpose through me." In reflecting on the strangely varying fruitfulness of his ministry, he recalls the Father's act of revelation, the Father's gracious will, the Father's giving of everything to him, the Father's knowledge of him and knowledge by him (Matt 11:25-27). At his transfiguration he finds the Father's words from his baptism being repeated (Mark 9:7). His anguished prayer in Gethsemane is "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Take

this cup from me, yet not what I want but what you want" (14:36). These words, too, take up the themes of his baptismal commission. God is the Father who loves him, and therefore Jesus can bring to God his longings and his desire for relief. God is also the Father who has expectations of him, and therefore Jesus accepts that ultimately God's will is what counts. Fatherhood combines love and authority, and sonship thus combines trust and submission, and an attitude that is free to query the will of God even though (or because) it is committed finally to accepting it.

It is a fair inference that the "Abba, Father" with which the Gethsemane prayer begins also characterizes the frequent resorting to prayer that the Gospels note (e.g., Mark 1:35). In his prayer life Jesus speaks back as a son to a father. Admittedly his distraught prayer from the cross is, "My God, my God, why have you left me?" There is no "Abba Father" here (Mark 15:34; though see Luke 23:34, 46). Yet the exception proves the rule. As in Psalm 22 which Jesus here takes up, the fact that he prays at all, and the fact that he prays to "my God," indicates that the moment of abandonment is, paradoxically, one in which the personal relationship still holds.

While God was known and addressed as "Father" in Judaism, the image was not a prevalent one, and as far as we know the Aramaic expression "Abba" was not used in prayer in contemporary Judaism. It was the family word with which children addressed their "Daddy," but it should not be romanticized. It was also the word grown-up children used to address their father, and it suggests an attitude of humility, obedience and reverence, as well as one of dependence, security and confidence. To have God as Father, then, means to be able to take for granted not only the fact of God's personhood but many aspects of God's nature. It implies that God is the kind of person who loves, cares, gives, listens, welcomes, seeks, accepts, guides, forgives, provides, who manifests interest, concern and self-sacrifice, and also the kind of person who has expectations and hopes, who exercises authority and power, who embodies discernment and wisdom, who has the right to criticize to judge and to determine.

Whatever the sense in which Jesus saw his own sonship as unique, and God's fatherhood in relation to him as different from God's fatherhood in relation to others, he emphasized that God behaves like a father to all humanity, and all are invited to relate to God as children. Thus he encourages his disciples to pray "Father..." just as he does; Luke explicitly makes a connection between Jesus' own praying and his teaching his disciples to pray like that (Luke 11:1-2). The "Lord's Prayer," which Luke introduces at this point, parallels the Gethsemane prayer as it works out the implications of God's being Father in terms of authority and caring. For Jesus' disciples, as for him, praying to the Father involves a longing for God's name to be hallowed and God's reign to come, before it can imply expecting God to be concerned with our basic needs (hunger, guilt, the pressure of evil). God is, as Matthew emphasizes, a heavenly Father, a Father in heaven, one who commands all heaven's resources and power for the fulfilling of people's needs, but also one who must be revered as the Lord of heaven.

It is thus both a solemn and an encouraging fact that disciples live before God as their Father. It is solemn and comforting that nothing happens without the Father knowing (Luke 16:15; Matt 6:4, 6, 8, 18). Having God as Father provides no immediate explanation of the unpleasant and

unpredictable aspects to human experience, but it does provide a way of coping with them in a confident, trusting submission to the Father's will.

In Matthew the Lord's Prayer appears in the context of portraying the broader implications of God's fatherhood (Matt 6). Jesus notes that certain prayer habits implied the assumption that other people are the only ones who hear us praying, or that we have to win God's attention to our prayer, or that we can forget about other people when we pray. Such habits raise the question whether prayer is talking to yourself, whether God is really interested in us, or whether in prayer we can turn our backs on how we get on with others. Jesus affirms that praying to a Father implies praying to one who really listens, one who is aware of and concerned for our needs and one who loves forgiving people and cares about my brother and sister as well as me. To that Jesus later adds the "beggar's wisdom"² (or child's wisdom) of ask, seek and knock, based on the logic that if a human father responds to children who ask for things they need, how much more will a heavenly one do so (Matt 7:7- 11; cf. Luke 11:5-13). And Paul adds that in the Spirit through Christ believers in general join Jesus in calling on God as "Abba, Father" (Rom 8:15; cf. Gal 4:6).

2 Involved God

The God of the First Testament is involved in the world. God is independent of the world and far too significant a figure to be in any way confined to it or captured in it. Yet for reasons the First Testament hardly goes into (does the play ask the playwright "Why did you write me?"), God did create the world and does direct its story. Our terms "creation" and "history" may suggest two separate enterprises; in the First Testament story, however, creation is the opening of that ongoing drama which stretches from Beginning to End. God is involved in it throughout, though in varying ways; sometimes intervening with sovereign initiatives, sometimes applying a mid-course adjustment to a trajectory that seems to have gone severely wrong, sometimes apparently leaving the story to develop on its own because it is doing all right or because it has to be allowed to get worse before it can be helped to get better, sometimes arranging behind the scenes for the right person to appear or the right event to take place at the right moment.

Partly because God's involvement is so varied in its dynamic, it is often difficult to identify. Belief in it removes little of history's ambiguity, at least as people live through history, unless God actually offers some interpretation of events before they take place, or in their midst, or after them. The First Testament pictures the ambiguity of history being substantially reduced over several centuries through the activity of prophets who could interpret the meaning of current events as well as the present significance of events of the past and of ones still to come. Their concern was not merely to announce or explain them, but to bring home the demand and the promise bound up in them. They declare that God is involved now in the destiny of Israel and of the nations, and that this involvement looks for a response.

² J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (reissued ed., London: SCM/New York: Scribner's, 1963), p. 159; he refers to K. H. Rengstorf, "Geben ist seliger denn Nehmen," in Michel Otto (ed.), *Die Leibhaftigkeit des Wortes* (A. Köberle Festschrift; Hamburg: Furche, 1958), p. 29.

God's involvement in the world is not confined to the macro-history of national and international affairs set in the context of ultimate Beginning and final End. Nor is the world that God invented a machine provided with an inbuilt energy source to keep it working on its own until God's purpose for it is finished. The God who gave stability and life to the world at the beginning continues to be the source of its stability and life. It is God's life-breath that animals breathe; plants drink the water God makes rain down. God is involved in the affairs of individual human beings as life-giver, provider, liberator, healer, companion, counselor. The conversation between humanity and God that the Psalms transcribe presupposes the awareness of that involvement in Israel's life over the centuries, the experience of that involvement in ongoing provision and crisis-intervention on the part of each generation and within the life of each individual, and the prospect of that involvement in God's once again turning back and acting on behalf of the needy when they seem to have been abandoned. It is the same involvement that is presupposed by Proverbs, missed by Ecclesiastes, and agonized over by Job.

The messianic expectations of Judaism presupposed that God's activity was not evident in the present in Israel's history. The reign of God is something Israel awaits, rather than experiences. When Jesus begins to preach, he asserts that the moment has now come when the King is asserting kingship (Mark 1:14, 15). This new assertion of God's royal authority is the best news the needy could hear. It means blessing for the poor, the grieving, the meek, the just, the merciful, the pure, the peaceable, the persecuted. They are to be given recompense, recognition, revelation, mercy, justice, property, comfort, and the "reign of heaven" itself (Matt 5:3-12).

The fact that God reigns is not a mere theological theory, statement of faith, or hope for some future day, but a living awareness both based in and creative of the experience of witnessing God's involvement as King in the world. God the King is at hand. God's time is now; God's reign dawns. Jesus' ministry means people can witness the blind receiving renewed sight, the disabled walking, people with diseases that cut them off from the rest of society being cleansed, the deaf enabled to hear, the poor having good news preached to them (11:4-5). A new age dawns in joy, a reign of God where Jesus and his people will drink a cup of wine anew instead of a cup of suffering, and join with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in a heavenly banquet (8:11; 26:29).

The implementation of God's reign turns upside down the expectations encouraged by human experience and rubber-stamped by religious tradition. The blessings of God's reign are given, not earned, so that they come to all no matter how long they have worked for them. Indeed, God's mercy naturally finds a home more readily with those who clearly need it than with those who have found ways of living independently of it. The prodigal son finds an unexpected welcome from a prodigally loving father, the child is the model for the receptivity that embraces God's reign, and God's heart fills with joy when one sinner repents (Matt 20:1-16; Mark 10:15; Luke 15; 18:9-14).

God's activity in the world as King is a reasserting of an ongoing involvement in the world which underlies it. God is the original creator as well as the Lord of the End (Mark 13:19). God made humanity male and female and joins together each couple in marriage (10:6-9). In the generosity

of power God blesses all, just and unjust, with rain and sun (Matt 5:45-48). It is God that Jesus thanks for bread and fish (Mark 6:41; 8:6-7). God feeds the wild birds and clothes the wild flowers and also sees that food and clothing are provided for those who seek God's just reign (Matt 6:25-33). God decides when to take back the life that God originally gave, and thus it can safely be entrusted to God on one's deathbed, or one's cross (Luke 12:20; 23; 46). It is also God's power that renews life on resurrection day; God is not Lord of the dead, but of the living (Mark 12:24-27). The notions of God as Creator, Father and King intersect in connections such as these. When Jesus handles topics we might see as belonging to God's activity in creation and providence, he himself commonly speaks in terms of God's fatherly provision for those who acknowledge God's kingship.

Paul works out the implications of the way involvement in the world cost God an acceptance of a share in humanity's suffering. It was not only Abraham who was willing not to spare his own son; God did so, being willing to give him up for us all (Rom 8:32). He also works out the way God continues the involvement which came to a climax in incarnation, by God's Spirit's dwelling among God's people (1 Cor 3:16-17; cf. Rom 8:11, 16).

3 Holy God

The First Testament God is involved in our world as a being with personal characteristics like ours. Yet God is not one of us; God is not a human person writ large. The First Testament's fundamental way of referring to God's distinctiveness is by speaking of God as the holy one. "Holiness" denotes the mysterious God-ness of God, distinctive, set apart, belonging to the heavenly realm, and therefore deserving the awed worship of those who belong to the created order. It points to the supercharged power, the self-assertive freedom, and the jealous wrath of the sometimes inexplicable God of Israel's story. God is not a person to be trifled with. Holiness denotes the majesty and glory of the one whom prophets were sometimes confronted by, a majesty and glory that are acknowledged for more everyday purposes by religious institutions such as the temple with its rituals.

In itself, holiness is not an ethical term. From where, then, do its ethical connotations come? Holiness means divinity, and it derives its further content from the nature of the God to whom holiness is ascribed. The God of the First Testament is righteous and just, and loving and merciful. It is by acting in righteousness and love that God reveals the essential content of holiness or divinity.

Isaiah, whose vision of Yahweh as the holy one expresses something of the notion of holiness summarized above (see Isa 6), also sums up in a convenient phrase the connection between holiness and justice: "the Lord of Hosts is exalted in justice, and the holy God shows himself holy in righteousness" (Isa 5:16). "Justice" denotes acting decisively in the cause of what is right ("judgment" in the older translations brings out more of the word's concrete, active meaning, and its connection with the "judges" of the Book of Judges). "Rightness" indicates the moral and relational quality of this activity: it suggests doing right by the people with whom one is in relationship. In Isaiah's context, the holiness of God issues in just judgment on those who ignore the God-ness of God and the rights of other people.

The link between holiness and love, faithfulness, or mercy is captured in a phrase from Isaiah's northern contemporary, Hosea. Hosea's understanding of God's personal involvement with Israel is expressed in terms of the mixed feelings of a parent for the child that does not respond to the loving care it receives. Yahweh is tempted, as it were, to cast off Israel, as such a parent might be tempted to cast off an unresponsive child: but as parents cannot really do that, so Yahweh cannot, and motherly love triumphs over hurt anger: "for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst" (Hos 11:9). The holiness of God which expresses itself in just judgment also expresses itself in mercy and grace.

A key First Testament expression for this aspect of God's character is the word *chesed*, often translated "steadfast love." It suggests the loyalty and faithfulness that always keeps a commitment that has been made to someone. Thus when Israel is unjustly oppressed, it can appeal to Yahweh to act "for the sake of his steadfast love" – that is, in order to be faithful to undertakings Yahweh has given. Yet Israel can also appeal to this steadfast love when it is quite justly oppressed, for the love it denotes is also one that goes beyond mutually binding commitments into the realm of grace, mercy and forgiveness. Even when acting in mercy and forgiveness, Yahweh retains the sovereign freedom of God, choosing when to show grace and mercy; but even at the moment of wrath, one can plead with God to remember mercy (Exod 33:11; Hab 3:2).

There is a close relationship between the love and justice that give expression to God's holiness, though there is also a tension between them. When God acts in justice on people's behalf, God is acting in love for them. In this sense, love and justice are two ways of speaking of the same reality. The tension arises from the difference between having God act in love or justice for you or against you. Hosea's prophecies express that tension particularly sharply, but it runs through the First Testament story from Gen 3 – 11 onwards. Whether one is reading of the experience of humanity as a whole, or of that of Israel in particular, one is reading of God's attempt to relate to people as the loving giver, and of God's willingness (in the light of the response they make) to relate to them as the righteous judge. Key symbols of God's relationship with Israel such as King, Father, and Judge can express both aspects of that relationship.

In the New Testament, the close relationship between God's love and God's justice (in the sense of God's doing right by a relationship of commitment to people) is illustrated by the way the former is the great emphasis in one of the classic theological expositions of the gospel (John 3:16) and the latter in another (Rom 3).

The first three gospels follow Jesus' baptism with his ordeal in the isolation of the Judean desert. The challenge Jesus faces here is whether he will let the holy one be the holy one, let God be God, acknowledged as sovereign over his living and dying, trusted for protection without first being proved, worshipped and served to the exclusion of other claims (see Matt 4:1-10).

Humble submission before this God includes turning one's back on sin. Jesus had accepted John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, even though it is he to whom John's ministry points. Jesus' preaching of good news then includes the demand for this turning from sin that John had also

made. The assertion of God's rule in the world that Jesus heralds and embodies means good news for the needy but danger for the sinner (and it often transpires that the needy are those who have been designated sinners, and the sinners are those who did the designating). Jesus talks much about judgment and about God as judge, and he continues to do so to those who have become disciples, who remain in danger of God's judgment if in their relationships with others they prefer a judging or a begrudging attitude to the forgiving attitude the judge has shown to them (Matt 7:1-5; 18:21-35).

The coming of God thus puts an urgent challenge before people. Jesus announces an imminent confrontation with God in all the holiness, purity, goodness, mercy and love of God's being. God cannot be placated by pointing to one's religious status or religious observance, for God's demands extend far beyond the outward righteousness for which these commonly stand. God manifests little sympathy with people committed to political action in order to bring about a reversal of political order, because this loses significance in the light of the imminent utter collapse of the kingdoms of this age. Indeed, he comes to earn the enmity of both the politico-religious establishment and the politico-religious revolutionaries. They co-operate in order to ensure his death, a death in which (as later theology came to reflect) God was actually involved and which was the very means of God's rule being established at the expense of all other kingdoms.

It is on the basis of his own "But I say to you ..." that Jesus urges forgiveness and reconciliation, marital faithfulness in thought and act, straightness in speech, submission and generosity, love and acceptance towards enemies as well as friends. God is rarely directly associated with such teaching, though God's fatherhood underlies the stance that is to be taken. It is to reflect God's style and bring glory to God (Matt 5:16, 45, 48).

Jesus himself has to let God be God over the fruits of his ministry. The rule of God is a mystery he comes to unveil, but there is a continuing mystery over whose eyes God opens to perceive what is unveiled, and about the process whereby God gives more to those who have and takes away from those who have nothing (Mark 4:10, 12, 24-25; 11:25-26). There is an awesome authority about the God of Jesus, one who requires the death of people for speaking evil of their parents, who roots up what others have planted, who expects Jesus to pick up his cross and walk to execution, who threatens a fiery hell for someone who leads others into sin, who can be likened to a vineyard owner who puts to death his son's murderers (Matt 15:5, 13; 16:21-23; 18:1-9; 21:33-43). Only God knows the day or hour when the Son of Man will come (Mark 13:32). But it is precisely the Father of whom Jesus says this. As with the fact that nothing happens without God knowing about it, the awesome God-ness of God can be lived with because God is a Father who can be trusted.

4 One God

It has often been tempting for Christians to assume that the God of justice and the God of love are two different gods, or to infer from the complexity of human experience (where both blessings and trouble, both encouragement and temptation, have a part) that good and evil powers exercise approximately similar degrees of influence in the world. The First

Testament emerged from contexts that did acknowledge many gods, or gods and demons, or balanced powers of light and darkness, yet it affirmed “Yahweh our God Yahweh one” (Deut. 6:4). This central confession of Jewish faith is as difficult to interpret as it looks. It makes clear enough that God is one, but it is not simply a statement about monotheism. It is an affirmation that Yahweh has the exclusive allegiance of First Testament faith; there can be no worshipping of Yahweh and some other power. It also suggests a contrast between the oneness of Yahweh and the multiplicity of the supernatural powers acknowledged by the Canaanites, the Babylonians, the Persians and other powers Israel lived among.

It was once customary to portray the history of First Testament faith as a development from animism (the worship of spirits of nature) via polytheism (the worship of many gods) and henotheism (the worship of one god among many) to monotheism (the recognition that there is only one God). The whole scheme can only be read into the First Testament; it is not there. From the beginning of its story Israel was laid hold of by one whose evident authority and might knew no rivals. Not that Israel therefore assumed that only one being dwelt in heaven. The diversity of earthly reality is at least matched by a diversity of heavenly reality. But none of the “sons of God” or “angels” has inherent divine power, for one will rules in heaven.

Such a statement is made only by faith. Other peoples did assume that the complexity of human experience suggested that the decision-making processes of heaven were as fraught and haphazard as those of earth. And in the context of modernity, there has been no more pressing philosophical question for the person who wishes to believe in God than that posed by the way suffering is distributed in the world, which makes it difficult to maintain that God is both powerful and fair.

Invited to qualify either their commitment to God’s power or to God’s love, Christians generally prefer to yield the former; humanity itself, and supernatural powers other than God, have significant responsible for evil in the world. The First Testament is hesitant about this move. It does refer three times to a heavenly adversary (a “satan”) concerned to trouble humanity, but it generally seeks to emphasize the conviction that there is one will that ultimately rules on earth and in heaven. It prefers to believe in a God who is in control, but who thus has to be held responsible for some very mysterious events, than in a God whose heart is in the right place but who is not very efficient. The prophet who declares most unequivocally that Yahweh alone is God is also the one who has God affirming the status of creator of both light and darkness, blessing and trouble (Isa 45:7).

If reality knows only one supreme locus of power and authority, and that is Yahweh, this raises questions about Yahweh’s relationship with the rest of the world outside Israel. It is not surprising that in the way Israel tells its story, it expresses the conviction that God has been involved with Israel itself. It is more surprising that it sets its own story in the context of the world’s story, acknowledging that God’s involvement with it is actually secondary to God’s involvement with the world as a whole. It is a means of reversing of the curse that seemed to come on world history, and of replacing this curse by the blessing God intended from the beginning.

In the bulk of the First Testament, the conviction that God’s concern for the world lies behind an involvement with Israel is expressed only

intermittently. That is nevertheless the context in which the opening chapters set Israel's story, and it remains part of Israel's background awareness which finds expression from time to time in the Torah, the Prophets, wisdom and psalmody. Israel recognizes that though the religion of Canaan is deeply perverse and the religion of Babylon dangerously beguiling, foreign peoples are within the control of Yahweh and are not without some true apprehension of God. The God Most High of Melchizedek and Nebuchadnezzar (Gen 14; Dan 3) is not wholly other than the God Most High of Abraham and Daniel, whose ultimate purpose is to bring all the nations to know God fully.

Israel also acknowledges that largely because of its own recalcitrance its own story has not really led to the degree of blessing suggested by the way the story opened. When it paints its most explicit future scenarios, it does so out of a feeling of being in exile, cut off from the place of blessing, still looking for that decisive intervention of God that will set world history right. It is this unfinishedness of the First Testament story that leaves it open to having the story of Jesus linked onto it.

Jesus will have believed that the awesome Father whose reign he came to proclaim and implement was the one God who is Lord of the nations as well as of Israel (cf. Mark 12:29). Yet this perspective has little prominence in his life and teaching, at least before his resurrection. Similarly he does not picture the God of Israel involved in world history. By implication fatherhood is God's attitude to all peoples; by implication the benevolent reign of God will extend over all peoples. But these themes are not very explicit. Jesus actually comes to Israel; it will be only on the basis of its renewal that the nations will be won. Jesus focuses on the former task, and resists being drawn into meeting the needs of people outside Israel (cf. Mark 7:24-30).

Ultimately, however, he is destined to rule the whole world. The story of his initial testing presupposes this (Matt 4:8). It also indicates that at the beginning of his ministry the confession of one Lord is made in the context of the pressure to bow down to another. A disciple, too, has to choose between God and Mammon (Matt 6:24).

Like the creative figures of First Testament faith, Jesus ministers in a context whose thinking might be described as "demon-ridden", and he distances himself somewhat from it. Whereas the First Testament normally distances itself by declining to speak of such forces of evil, Jesus does so by seeing such forces centered in one entity, Satan, the enemy who exercises hostile power in the name of an alternative kingship. Apparently from the beginning Jesus experienced evil as focused in this form. He lived in real conflict with it, but experiencing clear victory: Satan is no threat, to him or to his disciples (Luke 10: 18-19).

Like his contemporaries, Jesus also takes for granted aspects of their First Testament inheritance that qualify an affirmation of the oneness of God by speaking of God's Wisdom or God's Spirit as nascently distinguishable from God's person, or by picturing God's will being executed and God's care exercised by means of God's hosts of angels. The significant development of such insight into plurality within the one Godhead, however, takes place after Easter. The disciples come to affirm that Jesus is Lord, thereby describing Jesus by a term with the resonances of the actual name for God in the First Testament. The implications of this are present in a passage such as Rom 10:9-13, where the statement that confessing Jesus as Lord is key to salvation

is buttressed by a quotation that originally referred to the Lord Yahweh. These implications become more explicit as Jesus is seen as the unique embodiment of the divine wisdom (Col 1) and the divine word (John 1). The person who has seen Jesus has seen the Father (John 14:9). Further, in the light of the church's experience of the personal activity of God's spirit in its own midst it sees that spirit as simultaneously personal and distinguishable from the Father and Jesus (John 14 - 16). Affirmation of the oneness of God, never too important a concern (see 1 Cor 8:5-6), is well on the way to the qualifying that belongs to the post-scriptural period.